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ABSTRACT

Efforts by Christian colleges to integrate faith and learning in communication courses through conscious and direct planning are based on several questionable assumptions: that faith must be learned through the intellect, that all evangelical Christians share the same theological roots, and that interpersonal communication can be taught like any other subject. Faith can be viewed, however, in two ways--as a series of propositions or as an intuitive experience. The validity of both approaches is substantiated by current research in cerebral dominance. Injecting preplanned, conscious faith/learning integration into courses might destroy the possibility for more spontaneous, incidental learning. The Christian College Consortium represents not a uniform view of faith, but a variety of approaches reflecting different theological roots, and although the cognitive/propositional approach appears to dominate, Quaker writings offer support for incidental faith/learning integration through their emphasis on immediate revelation. While some teachers may prefer preplanned and conscious approaches, other teachers are by nature, personality, or philosophical commitment more at ease with the incidental mode. The communication classroom itself appears particularly suited for this mode. A valid means of integrating faith and learning, the incidental method should not be eliminated from the interpersonal communications classroom. (MM)

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THIS ART OF STRAINING SOULS: INCIDENTAL FAITH/LEARNING INTEGRATION IN THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM

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THIS ART OF STRAINING SOULS: INCIDENTAL FAITH/LEARNING INTEGRATION IN THE INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM

I will begin with a procedure that my old debate coach cautioned me either never to employ or at least use rarely. I will admit huge portions of the proposition under discussion at this Town Hall session.* It is well-stated and it seems to have the ring of truth about it. In fact, I will go so far as to allow that teachers at colleges belonging to the Christian College Consortium or its sister organization, the Christian College Coalition, should attempt to integrate the Christian faith and the disciplines they teach in by means of conscious and direct planning, at least I believe that some of them should. After all, the process is a noble one, helps build stamina if not character, reflects initiative and industry, and has a positive effect on reputation among peers. The publication of books and papers on faith and learning is currently in vogue and has been proceding at full throttle for a decade.[1] The task is certainly better at building "brain muscle" than learning Latin, currently out of vogue, and is not quite as removed from the practical concerns of life. Furthermore, the proposition accurately maps a territory somewhere in the left brain hemispheres of several Consortium deans' heads. Unfortunately, the proposition is flawed; it substitutes the part for the whole; it articulates a truth as if it were the truth; and it offers an unnecessarily restrictive and provincial picture. My essential objections to the proposition can be summarized in the following three statements: (1) it makes overarching assumptions about the way(s) faith, or anything else for that matter, is actually learned, assumptions which are questionable; (2) it assumes for

* Resolved: That the Christian College Consortium mandate to integrate faith and learning should be carried out in communication courses as a result of conscious and direct planning.

all "evangelical" Christians essentially the same theological roots, which translate roughly into uniformity of approach to the Christian faith and which translate even further into uniformity of pedagogical theory and practice; and (3) it tends to disregard the peculiar, if not unique, case that the teaching of interpersonal communication presents us with. In the brief time allotted me I will begin to elucidate my three objections and along the way imply that, at least for some of us Christian College Consortium Professors, incidental faith/learning integration is a viable option.

How to make faith/learning connections: two views.

There are at least two fundamentally different, although ultimately complementary, ways to look at faith. One pattern is to view faith's substance as a series of propositions which can be argued, understood, defended, and acted upon. People who see faith/learning integration from this perspective tend to stress faith's intellectual dimension, its rational or cognitive content. They are familiar with, and in some cases produce, systematic theologies and apologetic writings.

Another way to look at faith begins with the assumption that it is an act, that its most fundamental component is experiential or intuitive in nature, and that its most characteristic expression lies in the affective realm. People who see faith/learning integration from this perspective tend to stress faith's action and emotional dimensions, its affective content. These people are at their best writing devotional classics or poetry.

The published literature on faith/learning integration reflects the

former much more than the latter, and this situation is partially due to the writing interests of the two groups. The propositional/cognitive approach is illustrated in the faith/learning writings of Frank Gaebelein, D. Elton Trueblood, and Arthur Holmes, perhaps the three most influential writers on the subject among evangelical intellectuals.[2] Gaebelein argues that "God's truth" is discovered through a combination of reason and revelation (revelation restricted to "the inspired Word but manifest also in creation"[3]). Trueblood, an eminent philosopher and apologist, presents a stimulating and brilliant wholistic viewpoint on the concept of a Christian college, nevertheless beginning with the unequivocal statement: "the central task of a college is its intellectual task."[4] Holmes, probably the most influential writer on the subject in the Consortium circle, states flatly: "Integration should be seen not as an achievement or a position but as an intellectual activity that goes on as long as we keep learning at all."[5]

Notwithstanding my admiration for these writers as persons and thinkers, all of whom have from time to time stimulated, inspired, and even convicted me, I have come to the conclusion that their positions, as far as I understand them, are hyperbolic and that their emphasis on the propositional/cognitive approach to faith/learning integration offers a skewed image. The writers are, of course, in good company, for higher education has consistently overemphasized cognitive aspects of learning.

Thankfully, we are in the beginnings of a revolution in learning fired by research in learning theory and brain function which is starting to have an impact in primary, middle, and secondary schools. Colleges and universities, which have historically dragged their feet with regard to learning

theory in most disciplines outside their schools or departments of education, will be among the last impacted by the findings of hemispherical research. The findings tend toward conclusions expressed in a recent book by Bernice McCarthy intended to translate discoveries in brain research into practical pedagogical methods for teachers at all levels. McCarthy writes:

> In new situations, some of us sense and feel our way, while others think things through. Those who sense and feel tend more to the actual experience itself. They immerse themselves in the concrete reality. They perceive through their senses. They are intuitive. Those who think through the experience, tend more to the abstract dimensions of reality. They analyze what's happening. Their intellect makes the first appraisal. They reason experience.[6]

If hemispherical brain research is correct, we can probably look forward to eventual dramatic changes in how we structure educational experiences (to say nothing of our worship experiences). The research tends to corroborate my view that faith can be "caught" through experience, through intuition, as well as through the intellect and reason. It is in the realm of incidental learning, where the teacher and learner trust their intuitive responses, where faith/learning integration has taken on new meaning for me. Such experiences are, of course, partly intellectual, partly rational, but it is the intuitional feature that dominates during these moments. To borrow a metaphor from the theatre, in the Christian College Consortium we must continue to make room for traditional scripted dramas (deriving their material from theological thought and writings), but we must also make room for improvised dramas drawn from incidents occurring in the normal (and abnormal) calendar of our courses, the actors (<u>both</u> teachers and students) responding

intuitively from the experience of their faith within the learning setting. A class taught in this perspective becomes a course of events. Freed from the dominance of the left brain, I am convinced the learners (including the teacher) become more attuned to the mysterious ways in which faith intersects with life incidents. There is a good chance that learners can experience what early Quakers called "openings," those unplanned insights which argue so persuasively for a God who is very much alive.

When I have discussed this idea with colleagues, a common response is that they do allow for the spontaneous to occur. However, further questions often reveal that once the preplanned, conscious, direct, "faith/learning integration" is injected into their courses, a de facto elimination of the incidental approach actually takes place. Admittedly, the incidental path is more risky and far less predictable. I understand why it is so often avoided or given lip service.

Gaeblein, Trueblood, and Holmes stress that the minimum requirement for faculty positions at Christian colleges must be personal Christian commitment on the part of the applicant.[7] This kind of commitment is crucial for a teacher who leans toward the incidental path. Actually, with the propositional approach, it would be possible for a non-Christian to mouth the right words, state and apply the school-approved propositions, and stay within the department's party line. Such a teacher might last several years at one of our institutions. On the other hand, a teacher using the experiential approach, with its reliance on intuitive learning, must do something more--risk his/her personal faith in what may become a confrontive atmosphere. The intuitive style demands more honesty, or in the jargon of our discipline, more "authenticity."

Roots Nourish Trees.

The dominance of the rationalistic propositional/cognitive type of thinking among writers about faith/learning integration has deep and exceedingly complex roots. In the short time alloted I cannot even sketch the root system, but I think I can discover the taproot.

The Reformation was not a unitary or unilateral movement. It included moderate forces and extreme. Robert Webber, in an essay on the cultural origins of evangelicalism (the basic amalgum of beliefs that informs the institutions belonging to the Christian College Consortium), traces the movement from the Reformation, through Pietism and Revivalism, the rise of Fundamentalism, and finally to Evangelicalism.[8] Webber's otherwise excellent account oversimplifies the case of roots. Whether he intends it or not, the reader is left with the implication that contemporary evangelicalism is a unitary or monolithic theological view. This is simply not the case. Like the term "Reformation," "Evangelical" covers a gamut of differences, some of them theological, some cultural, some both. Among Christian College Consortium schools, for example, are those whose roots differ in significant ways from their sister schools.[9] Surely one would expect some differences among schools drawing historical sustenance from such widely differing theologians as James Arminius, John Calvin, John Wesley, and Menno Simons. The problem of lost identity among the colleges is exacerbated for colleges such as Malone and George Fox whose roots are deep in some of the most radical soil of the late Reformation.[10] Some of the differences in roots do not produce particularly significant variations in "bloom," but some do. Particularly for Quakers, the roots invite a reexamination of epistemology, rhetoric, and pedagogy relating to faith/learning integration. That is why I believe it is presumptuous for writers on the subject

to speak for all evangelicals without acknowledging the sometimes major differences in historical and theological presuppositions.

That differing starting points can produce radically different approaches to life, including how we view our educational ventures and pedagogy, to say nothing about politics, is illustrated convincingly in a recent book by E. Digby Baltzell, Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia.[11] Baltzell shows how fundamental oppositions between Puritan and Quaker understandings of man, evil, and the scriptures produced opposite cultural consequences. He argues that Boston and Philadelphia differ today because of sometimes subtle, sometimes strikingly monumental differences over theology held by their respective founders. If we apply an analysis like Baltzell's to faith/learning integration and the Christian College Consortium schools, we also discover some interesting ties between theological/historical roots and present practice. For example, the evangelical roots described by Webber are basically deductive in nature, i.e., they begin with the Bible as the final authority in all matters of faith. Biblical truth is then applied a priori in life situations. A corollary to this tenent is that learning in our various disciplines should be subjected to, or at least related to, the yardstick of truth as revealed in the scriptures. I have no quarrel with this viewpoint, but we should recognize it for what it is. The position is a reformed theological point of view derived from writers such as John Calvin and enshrined in the faith and practice of the seventeenth century Puritans. It is a valid position, but it is not the only one. It is seen to the best advantage among faith/learning integration scholars in the writings of Gaebelein and Holmes.

An alternative theological position, expressed by anabaptist writers but principally by Quakers, much closer to the theological roots of my own institution, stresses the immediate moving or revelation of truth by God, a position which perforce places scripture in a secondary but significant role.[12] It argues that Christ is present in our lives and will inform and prompt us in life situations while yet never contradicting the truth revealed in the scriptures. Contemporary Quakers, who still stress the importance of immediate revelation from God, the "inward light of Christ" or "Christ our present teacher," perceive ourselves as slightly "out of sinc" with most of the writings about the faith/learning interface, and one reason is that the writings have paid attention to some Reformation roots and paid scant attention to others.[13] Specifically, the implications of Quaker theological positions have not been a part of the dialogue on faith/learning and, ironically, these positions are the very ones which tend to lay stress on and give credence to incidental integration. I do not have time properly to develop this notion here, only to deliver an opening salvo. Let me say that I believe early Quaker, and some later Quaker writers offer theological substantiation for incidental faith/learning integration through their emphasis on immediate revelation, and on egalitarian individualism as opposed to hierarchical communalism.[14] One offshoot of this viewpoint would be a moderation of the belief that the teacher is the primary dispenser of data or even the primary authority in the learning arena.

Teaching Interpersonal Communication: A Different Kind of Game.

Although I would want to argue, because of what I have said already, that incidental faith/learning integration is more effective and more significant than preplanned conscious and direct integration with any subject

in anyone's curriculum, I am also conscious that the basic interpersonal communication course is where incidental integration should be seen at its best advantage. I use John Stewart's and Gary d'Angelo's text, Together: Communicating Interpersonally, in my basic course because I accept their philosophy that "interpersonal" communication is a quality, a kind of communication in which "two or more humans are willing and able to make available or share some of their personness--their uniqueness, choices, feelings, and reflectiveness--and to be aware of some of the other's personness."[15] This approach demands from me an honesty, an "authenticity," a risky sharing of my personhood that I might be able to escape in other courses. Although I can plan ahead my sharing of personhood with my students, I usually do not, preferring to let it arise incidentally during class activities.

There are numerous teaching styles available to the instructor in the interpersonal communication course. I build my course from a basically experiential base using "games" and simulations gathered from writings in psychology, actor training, small group theory, etc., as well as several gems out of my own head. My experience tells me that my predilections for the incidental mode of faith/learning integration are particularly suited for the interpersonal communication class. Actually, during my first few years of teaching I followed the advice offered by the advocates of conscious and direct planning. I was unsatisfied. Then, one quarter I cast my notes on the subject to the wind, incorporated a planned series of games (leaving out specific faith/learning applications), and, as the pop culture phrase goes, "trusted the Force." I shared about faith, my own faith, only as I "felt led," and then only with honesty. The effect was startling: students

responded in kind more often, formal student evaluations of the course became more positive, my ancillary counseling took on a deeper meaning and became more frequent, and of extreme importance, my own sense of growth as a person began to increase. As I shared my faith, even in its weak or negative dimensions, especially when I was able to cast off my previous persona of "authority" in these matters, I found the joy of personal growth, and my students appeared to also. I believe we were discovering life as a pilgrimage, life in the experiential mode.

When it came time for the consideration of my tenure at the institution, I was instructed to write the obligatory faith/learning position paper required of all candidates for tenure at George Fox College. In response to the query "How do you integrate your faith in the teaching/learning experience?" I wrote these words:

> I cannot help it. I am not neatly compartmentalized into mind, body and soul; teacher, father, husband, son; or even vascular, muscular, skeletal and nervous systems. These divisions, categories or roles are analytic in nature. In reality I am a whole being and function wholistically. My "compartments" keep spilling over into each other; the roles interchange; when I cut my finger, I bleed, hurt, limit muscular activity, experience regret, etc., all at once. My God-consciousness tends to infuse my teaching in much the same way as my New England heritage, my love of language, and my sense of humor. I hold my faith stretched between the twin shoals of dogmatism, on the one hand, and tenuousness, on the other; but I hold it tenaciously. My faith is in process and I try to emphasize process in my approach to subject matter.[16]

So you see by nature, personality, and philosophical commitment I favor the incidental mode. I have no objection to preplanned and conscious efforts except where they are seen as the only possible route in a faith-affirming college. I see today's Town Hall subject in terms of a

metaphor: if faith/learning interface is conceived as a room, then the proposition opens one door to the room and takes us on a detailed tour of one corner. There is more to the room, however, and there are alternative doors. I am simply pointing you to the door I use and giving you a glimpse of the corner where I am frequently found.

Full Circle: Faith as Experience.

In recent years I have been enriched in reading and re-reading Annie Dillard's masterpiece, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek. Early on she tells us that "life is a faint tracing on the surface of mystery, like the idle, curved tunnels of leaf miners on the face of a leaf."[17] At the end of the book she writes: "Divinity is not playful. The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see. And then you walk fearlessly, eating what you must, growing wherever you can" (p. 270). I resonate to her words. I think I am drawn to the element of mystery. I personally do not resonate to words from systems which avoid talk about "the unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet." For my part, incidental approaches allow more celebration of the mystery.

I drew the title for this paper from a poem by a colleague and close friend, Edward Higgins. The poem brings me around again to my first point, that faith can be understood as propositional or experiential. In reality, of course, it is a false dichotomy; both are true. But if I had to choose, I would choose the second. Here is the poem:

Faith

this art
of straining
souls,
always
building/
breaking
cages,
reaches--

then
pushes beyond
the nothing
as if ignoring
the harshest fact

and lives the design.[18]

Notes

[1] A recent bibliography distributed to Christian College Consortium deans lists 361 entries on the subject. George Akers, Bibliography: The Integration of Faith and Learning, prepared by the Religious Education Area, School of Graduate Studies, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, MI 49104, revised, Winter, 1983.

[2] Frank E. Gaebelein, The Pattern of God's Truth: Problems of Integration in Christian Education (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968); D. Elton Trueblood, The Idea of a College (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1959) and "The Marks of a Christian College," in Toward a Christian Philosophy of Higher Education, ed., John Paul von Grueningen (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959); and Arthur F. Holmes, The Idea of a Christian College (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975).

[3] Gaebelein, p. 19.

[4] Trueblood, The Idea of a College, p. 19. Emphasis mine.

[5] Holmes, p. 48. Emphasis mine.

[6] The 4MAT System: Teaching to Learning Styles with Right/Left Mode Techniques (Oak Brook, Ill.: EXCEL, Inc., 1980), p. 3.

[7] See, for example, Gaebelein, pp. 36-37; Trueblood, "The Marks of a Christian College," pp. 168-69; and Holmes, pp. 100-101.

[8] "Cultural Origins" in Marvin K. Mayers, Lawrence O. Richards, and Robert Webber, Reshaping Evangelical Higher Education (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972), pp. 13-25. Webber's chart on page 17 is especially illuminating.

[9] For example, Bethel College is supported by the Baptist General Conference (Swedish Baptist), Seattle Pacific has roots in the Free Methodist Church, Eastern Mennonite is, predictably, Mennonite, and Malone College is Quaker.

[10] For a good cross section of early Quaker thought see Hugh Barbour and Arthur O. Roberts, Early Quaker Writings (Newberg, Oregon: The Barclay Press, 1972).

[11] (New York: The Free Press, 1979).

[12] See Robert Barclay, Apology for the True Christian Divinity . . . . (Manchester, England: William Irwin, 1869), p. x. First published in 1678.

[13] Elton Trueblood, a Quaker, is an anomaly in this respect. Although he is quite aware of Quaker roots, he does not stress the immanent nature of Christ in its full pedagogical implication.

[14] The opposition is Baltzell's, p. 94.

[15] 2nd ed. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1980), p. 78.

[16] "Making Pearls of Price," a paper presented to the Academic Committee of the Board of Trustees, George Fox College, Newberg, Oregon, Spring, 1976, p. 1.

[17] (New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1974), p. 9.

[18] In On The Edge of a Truth: A Small Anthology of Poetry by Northwest Quakers, ed., Nancy Thomas (Newberg, Oregon: The Barclay Press, 1980), p. 11. Used by permission.